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Challenges in Listening to Second Language Learners

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ANNOTATION

The article describes some challenges that second language learners face during language acquisition period. Listening is the language aspect to provide effective communication that means being able to receive the information given by the speaker. In order to improve this aspect, exact problems related to listening should be identified beforehand.

KEYWORDS: Challenge, listening, second language, second language learners.

Introduction

Listening is the one of the most important aspect of language. Rebecal (1993) also claimed that L2 and foreign language teachers often ignore listening despite of being fundamental language skill. Most of the English language learners consider listening part as the most challenging. In educations systems, grammar, vocabulary and reading sections are emphasized, that's why learners do not pay attention to listening skills and can not understand English whereas they have been learning for a long time. Many school text books do not contain listening activities at all or full of mistakes, low-quality and not appropriate to pupils' level. As a result, teachers try to escape improving pupils' listening skills and it leads to listening challenges. Hedge (2007) considered that L2 learners' 45%-50% time are engaged in communication. Right (2015) stated that learner may lose their chance of learning L2, if they can not acquire in their appropriate level. In this work, the researchers mentioned listening and English language learner challenges related to it. Being aware of students weak points helps to develop listening strategies. It is intended to highlight the key challenges in the field of listening comprehension.

Materials and Methods

Bottom-up and Top-down processing

In linguistic area, there are two main approaches to understanding information from the world. They are bottom-up and top-down approaches. Bottom-up processing can be observed when learner pay attention to individual meaning or grammar. Top-down processing is action to try comprehend the meaning from the context. For instance, in bad handwriting we can not read some words, however we can guess and find them according to surrounded words.

1. Listener related problems

In many cases, challenges in listening depend on listener. In order to tackle their problems, students should recognize their own inabilities.

1.1 Knowledge

Of course, L2 learner may learn the language with listening aspect, however they can understand foreign language by a lot repetition. It is certain that previous knowledge not only on English, but also other subjects create a comfort zone for comprehension. Because, listener can easily understand the meaning, guess what may be spoken in audio or remember topic vocabularies. Lack of knowledge always lead to challenges.

1.2 Concentration and attention

Concentration and attention are the key solutions of listening comprehension. By losing the concentration for a little time, listener may miss main point or misunderstanding whole information.

1.3 Motivation and interest

Failing conditions with listening activities bring learners into thoughts about unintelligent, give up learning or just copying from something or someone. They may not have interest to learning or unmotivated by ordinary acts, however appropriate motivation from teacher, parents or just friends can lead to high results in listening skills.

1.4 Anxiety

Persons mood has an important role in language learning. During listening process, listener can not comprehend the core meaning, although they catch every word due to nervous condition. It is considered as a quite affective factor. Mostly, listening anxiety happens with difficult and new variant of tasks. Also, when they are lack of time. Gardner and Macintyre (1999) claimed that anxiety is the most negative influence to the language learning.

1.5 Boredom and frustration

Unfamiliar topics and long listening tasks make students bored and next time they try to avoid training with listening exercises. In some times, listener may have idea such as I can not understand despite of trying hard.

1.6 Preoccupation

It is close notion to distraction but a bit different. During lecture or recording, students think about other things, remembering, thinking about what is next.

1.7 Too focused on details

Students overly draw attention to some facts and create challenges to themselves. Listening for gist not to detail will be helpful to reach the meaning.

1.8 Rebuttal tendency

Humanity has a character hastiness and it can be widely seen in listening exercises. Students listen half of one information and try to write it into answer sheet not waiting till correct point.

2. Speaker related problems

In listening comprehension, speaker is in the scene and main factor to reach effectiveness. Delivery of some new information is done by speaker, so they are always in the center of attention and critique.

2.1 Pronunciation

Bloomfield (2010) considered that issues with pronunciation is one of the most serious problem among learners that is various from print version. The varies between spoken and written language can create some challenges for students. In order to identify which word was pronounced, some points of message may be lost due to over attention only one word.

2.2 Accent

In most surveys, ESL learners prefer native accent. According to Munro and Derwing (1999), over accented speech leads to notable reduction in comprehension. Critical difficulties in listening may arise when students hear unfamiliar or non-native accents such as Indian English for the first time after long training with American or British English, as a result of this, listeners encounter nervous and giving up conditions for some time.

2.3 Intonation

Language prosodic features such as stress, intonation, rhythm are the key delivery tools of oral speech and play vital role in English listening comprehension. Poor intonation may cause misunderstandings and wrong impression. Intonation is considered as a music of language.

3. Message related problems

Choosing appropriate listening is easy every time. It demands to draw attention message quality suitable to listeners age, level, interest and proper in length.

3.1 Quality of audio materials

In some cases, recorded audio materials do not have high quality selected by teachers. The quality of sound will be poor or it may be prepared by non-native users of language and tracks with noise interrupted or irrelevant speech.

3.2 Speed of listening

The rate of recording or lecturer doesn't depend on listener. (Gnoheim 2013) Learners should be able to catch the meaning of text at various rates of speed. Jensen and Vinther (2003) organized comparison by dividing learners into two groups and taught listening with slow and fast video dialogues. Research showed that slow-down audio tracks helped that group to improve grammatical accuracy also. Learners are always of afraid fast speeches despite of their gained knowledge. It leads to loose self-confidence of themselves.

3.4 The content

The huge amount of students admitted that unfamiliar words, slangs idioms, proverbs, jargons affect mostly. Nation (2001) defined vocabulary as a core base of comprehension.

3.5 Complex grammar

Osada (2004) stated that grammar was the potential barrier to effective listening comprehension. Usage of different grammatical structures make listening challenging to L2 listeners. Certainly, without knowing word orders and appropriate utilization understanding oral language will be much more difficult.

3.6 Cultural differences

In second language learning, being familiar with the culture of language has a significant effect in listening. In the listening activities, there may be given totally different cultural notions which are strange to learners and they lead to critical problems. Giving background knowledge before the task would be better.

4. Physical setting problems

4.1 Environment

Learners can be easily distracted by environment surrounded by them. Field (2003) emphasized that oral language can be distracted from phonological impacts such as assimilation, dissimilation, reduction and also phone calls, background noise, conversations, radio transmissions. (Bloomfield, 2010).

Conclusion

Listening comprehension is the main part of conversation. It is common that many education systems have ignored. It should be main goal of language learning and despite of numerous challenges, L2 learner keep to study. The goal of this paper is to show that listening demands more active preparation and vital aspect to be proficient user of L2 in classroom and to get a job. Students L2 listening skills should be perfect as their mother tongue. There are plenty of methods to improve listening comprehension and learner can choose some of them according their learning styles. The review of literature indicated most serious and wide-encountered challenges among L2 listeners. It is hoped to be beneficial to improve listening skills by recognizing their own challenges.

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